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# EARLY INVESTIGATIONS IN SPIRITUALISM.

BY JOHN TOWNSEND TROWBRIDGE.

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It is now more than fifty years since I first became familiar with the phenomena of so-called spirit communication. If my early investigations are worth recalling, it is because of the interest that attaches particularly to the beginnings of great movements, and because few persons now living can relate experiences extending so far back, with these amazing manifestations of a power that remains no less mysterious and no less real, after having been so often explained away.

*Mrs. Hayden and the Raps.*—Early in the year 1852, Dr. William R. Hayden, publisher of a weekly newspaper in Boston, asked me one day in his office if I had ever heard the “Rochester Knockings.” He went on to say: “I’ve got them, or something of the kind, in my house, and I don’t know what to make of them.”

The “Rochester Knockings,” as they and kindred phenomena were termed at the time, having first manifested themselves in Rochester three or four years before, had afterwards broken out in many places, and become a subject of wonder or ridicule all over the country. I had hitherto regarded them with sceptical indifference, but what Dr. Hayden had to say of them roused my curiosity, and I eagerly accepted an invitation to hear them that evening at his house.

The séance had commenced when I arrived. The doctor placed a chair for me at a table around which were seated three or four other persons, all strangers to me, except Hayden’s partner in the newspaper business, Mr. Peabody. Mrs. Hayden was the medium; I then saw her for the first time. I observed her carefully during the evening, and never for a moment doubted her sincerity of character and honesty of purpose; an impression which some years of subsequent acquaintance with her tended to

confirm. She was not especially cultured, but a woman of good sense, pleasant manners and an amiable disposition.

When silence, interrupted by my entrance, had been restored, we all listened, and soon heard a series of rapid but faint concussions, which seemed to be neither on nor under the table, but in the leaf itself, somewhere between the medium and the shaded lamp before her. Mr. Peabody, who was getting a message from his "gran'sir," passed a pencil up and down a printed alphabet that lay on the table, and paused when a decisive rap was heard. Thus words, sentences and finally a long communication were spelled out. It was something quite commonplace, such a message as any other grandfather might have given any other person present; but what astonished me was that any message at all should be given in that way. The medium's hands were in sight all the time, usually folded on the edge of the table, and she seemed to await the result of the word-building with as genuine an interest as any of us. At times, a mistake would occur, which would not be discovered until it was found that the sentence did not make sense. Then the pencil would go back over it until a rap would indicate the word that was out of place or misspelled. Other messages were given, and a few names spelled out, which some present declared to be the names of departed friends, unknown to the medium, but I received nothing more definite than "Father," hard as I tried to get some initial. The séance over, Mrs. Hayden welcomed my most searching questions as to what she knew of the raps and how they were produced, and I was convinced of her candor when she looked earnestly into my eyes and said: "I know no more about them than you do." I went away puzzled and astonished, but by no means satisfied that departed spirits had anything to do with them.

This séance was fairly representative of the early, crude manifestations which were then awakening an interest in Boston, and which I witnessed on frequent occasions in Mrs. Hayden's presence. Many surprising "tests" were received by others when I was in the circle, of which a single example will suffice. Once the word "Squeak" was spelled out for a young man, a stranger to the Haydens, and to all of us except a friend who had introduced him. He appeared much agitated, the communication purporting to come from his mother.

"When I was about nine years old," he afterwards explained,

"I had a new pair of shoes, and was so proud of making them squeak as I walked about the house that she gave me that nickname and often called me by it. But it hasn't been in my mind, I haven't thought of it, for years."

I got some tests for myself, but nothing very well worth recording, until one memorable occasion when I had the good fortune to find Mrs. Hayden alone. She was reading an evening paper, which she laid aside as I entered. The raps came on the table almost as soon as I was seated; and in a little while she said, "They want to communicate with you." I replied, "If I can get a message without taking up your time, it will give me great satisfaction. Keep on reading your 'Transcript' and let me see if anything will come."

She assented and sat with her shoulder towards the lamp, in order to get the light on her paper, while I placed myself on the opposite side of the table. Not only was her face turned away from me, but the lamp was between us, and she could not by any possibility have seen the letters at which my pencil pointed.

One of the first words rapped out was "Father." That was not surprising; it had been spelled out for me several times before, and it was in my mind at the time. My father was to me the nearest and dearest intelligence in the life beyond this, if there was any life beyond this, or any such intelligence. I said: "If you are really my father, you should be able to give me your name," which was immediately followed by a lively dance of raps on the table. I carried the pencil down the alphabet, and there came a response at *W*, the right initial (the name being Windsor). I had a notion that anything that came might be a reflection from the mind of some one present; and it was just possible that an unconscious movement of my own hand had influenced the rap. But the letter I next expected, which should have been *i*, was passed over, and no knock came until I arrived at *s*. I could make nothing of that; and the next letter given, *t*, was still more mystifying. "*Wst*" could start no orthographical combination of letters. "Is that right?" I asked; and a brief patter of affirmative raps responded. The next letter was *o*, and I had the enigmatical beginning "*Wsto*," which could certainly lead to no intelligible conclusion. Then an *n* was added to my riddle; and, Mrs. Hayden happening to look up, I asked her if she could make anything of it.

"Are the letters all right?" she asked. Decided raps—"yes." "Does he read them aright?" In response, an *e* was added, and I had "*Wstone*." The right reading flashed upon me; and when I rewrote them, "*W. Stone*," the glee manifested by the little concussions in the board was something affectingly human. "*Stone*" was my father's middle name, which I had not had in my mind at all, while *W.* was his first initial. This was all I could then get of the name, which was not given in full until a later sitting.

I was quite overcome by this evidence of an operating intelligence separate from my own mind or the medium's, and possibly of my father's actual presence. I remember well the effect produced upon me, indescribable in any terms, as I sat gazing at what I had written from the mysterious dictation, and trying to grasp its bewildering significance.

Mrs. Hayden resumed her "*Transcript*" and I the use of the alphabet and pencil, asking, from that time on, mental questions only, and receiving answers as direct and relevant as if I had asked aloud. Some of these came in a way as unexpected and surprising as that in which the name had been given; but as they related chiefly to my father's last illness, they cannot suitably be detailed here. Things I had forgotten, until thus reminded, came first, and matters which I thought should come first came afterwards; but all were correctly given, although one part of the message was wholly unintelligible, until a mistake in writing it down was discovered, as in the case of the first and second names, thus affording additional proof of the action of a mind independent of my own. That the medium's volition, or cognizance of results, had nothing to do with all this was absolutely certain; only her presence was necessary for the production of the raps. Who and what, then, was the invisible collocutor in this astounding telepathic dialogue? Where the other station, and what the nature of the instrument, that by such simple but inscrutable means transmitted messages charged with the purport of things known only to the dead, if the dead were not still alive?

I received through Mrs. Hayden's mediumship various communications after this, generally satisfactory when conditions were favorable, and all, even when trivial or baffling, as they sometimes were, tending to confirm my conviction that they came from some source beyond her consciousness or my own. Granting that the

intelligence shown might have had a subconscious origin in either of us, the raps by which it was interpreted remained still to be explained. That they could not be accounted for on any "toe-joint" theory, I had startling proof on one occasion when I had walked home with the doctor in the afternoon, and only he and his wife were present with me at the table. It was a heavy centre table. The doctor and I were on opposite sides of it, the medium at my right hand. I have quite forgotten what had been going on, when the raps became so unusually loud that the doctor said, jokingly, "Can't you knock any louder than that?" Instantly there came so tremendous a blow in the massive mahogany that I cried out, excitedly, "Hayden, you kicked it!" "Did I?" he said, at the same time moving his chair back two or three feet towards the wall. Immediately another resounding blow followed, and the table, as if impelled by it, rolled towards him on its casters and tilted over upon him, the leaf resting on his knees. "Who kicked it that time?" he retorted, while Mrs. Hayden also moved her seat back, as if to get out of the way of such antics. I followed their example, so that the table had a wide space for its uncanny performances. After resting on his knees for a few seconds, it righted itself (his hands were held up in full view over it), glided back across the floor, gently at the start, then with increasing momentum, and tipped over again lightly as a feather, this time on my knees. Both the doctor and Mrs. Hayden were several feet away from it, and I remained passive, holding up my hands until it once more righted itself and rolled to its original position in the centre of the room. All this was in broad daylight. The performance concluded with several loud raps.

"Did I kick it?" chuckled the doctor in his corner, and I was obliged to admit that he was as innocent of kicking as I was. The floor was carpeted; there was no possibility of any mechanism being concealed in or under the table, and there was an open space between it and the medium. On several occasions after this, in the presence of other mediums, I saw tables and other pieces of furniture tipped and moved, generally with curtains drawn and lights turned low; but it was a kind of exhibition I never much cared for, or went out of my way to witness.

It was an interesting feature of the early séances with Mrs. Hayden that no pecuniary profit was derived from them, and both she and her husband appeared to be as disinterested investigators

as any of their guests. But as the medium's power developed and became more widely known, the demands made upon her time by their friends and the friends of their friends correspondingly increased; until the doctor announced to me one day, "It's one of two things; it has got to stop, or it has got to be a business." I implored him not to make it a business; but he shook his head. "There's money in it," he said; and money was an important consideration with him just then. His weekly newspaper was not flourishing, and he had been for some time anxious to turn his attention to some more profitable enterprise. Was not here a providential opening, with opportunity to aid in giving to the world the revelation of spirit communication, and of grasping at the same time a fortune? He seemed to think so; and Mrs. Hayden became a public medium.

She was undoubtedly the best in Boston, in those days, and she soon became the most noted. The doctor disposed of his newspaper interest, and devoted his energies to the new business. For a while it drew in a good deal of money, but this never came in quite fast enough, and he conceived a bold scheme of taking Mrs. Hayden to London and achieving a success with her there, beyond anything possible on this side of the Atlantic. His judgment was in a measure justified by the results. He took a house in a fashionable quarter, and soon attracted to it throngs of visitors, many of them titled or otherwise distinguished, dukes, authors, reformers, men of science—Bulwer Lytton for one, then at the height of his fame as a novelist; and, for another, old Robert Owen, the Socialist, then an octogenarian, who, through Mrs. Hayden's mediumship, became converted from his life-long philosophical scepticism to a belief in immortality. The avowal of this conversion through her means I had from the aged philanthropist's own lips, when I saw him in London in the spring of 1855, and talked with him through his ear-trumpet on what had become to him the most vitally interesting of all topics.

The fee of a guinea was paid as readily for admission to these London sittings as half a dollar had been paid in Boston; and the doctor's dream of affluence might have been realized if the expenses of living abroad had not been proportionately high, or if other mediums had not soon crowded in to reap their share of the harvest.

*Vision and Prophecy.*—One of my intimate friends of those

years was Benjamin P. Shillaber, who had gained a reputation as a genial humorist by his sayings of "Mrs. Partington." He was then editing "The Carpet-Bag," a weekly paper, mildly comic, to which I was a contributor. He was also interested in the mysterious communications, and we often discussed them when we met. One day in his office, he spoke to me of a friend whose wife was developing some extraordinary mediumistic traits. This friend was Alonzo E. Newton, editor of "The Pathfinder Railway Guide," whose office was in the same building with "The Carpet-Bag." I eagerly accepted the offer of an introduction. We found Mr. Newton correcting proofs at his desk; and, after a little talk about the manifestations in his house, he invited me to call and witness them for myself. This was in October, 1852.

I called one evening, and made acquaintance with Mrs. Newton in their modest home. She was *petite* in person, of a singularly trustful and sympathetic nature, generously impulsive, and, like her husband, earnestly religious. They were both members of the Edwards Congregational Church, although Mr. Newton was even then penning his remarkable letter to the Church on "The Ministry of Angels Realized," giving their own private, personal experience, and adducing Scriptural authority for the new, or rather renewed, faith;—a letter which both signed, and which, when printed, created a considerable stir among the members of the body to which it was addressed, and led finally to the signers' withdrawal from a communion that had long been the habit of their lives and was still dear to them. This was the first of a long series of able writings on the same and kindred topics by which Mr. Newton became well known to the Spiritualists of America. His wife's mediumship was as different as possible from that which produced the rappings and other more material manifestations. When, as we sat together that first evening, the "influence," as it was called, came upon Mrs. Newton, her eyes closed, her features assumed a rapt expression; she drew two or three deep breaths, in what seemed a condition of semi-trance (although she never at such times lost consciousness), and began to speak. The subject was their troubled relations with the Church, regarding which some invisible friend was giving them comfort and counsel. Not invisible to her, however, for to her inward eyes the room was full of spiritual beings, some as real to her as if they had appeared in the flesh. The first communicant gave way



to others, and some really beautiful and inspiring things were spoken on the subject of spirit existence and the belief in it,—of all which I recall little but the ease and readiness of the language, quite different from the medium's ordinary speech. At length she turned to me and said in a changed voice, after a pause, "Your father is here." I asked some questions, hoping for a test, but got none, although the answers were such as my father might have given, and her description of him was consistent with my recollection of his form and features, after a lapse of eight or nine years. Whether these visions had any actuality, or existed in the seer's too weird imagination, I had no means of knowing, but I was convinced of the purity of her intentions, and of her husband's absolute faith in her.

My visits to the house became frequent after this, and I had the satisfaction of witnessing, and even of assisting in, the development of new phases of her mediumship. She was the first person I ever knew who had the psychometric faculty. I found her wonderfully accurate in reading the characters of persons wholly unknown to her if something belonging to them—a lock of hair or their handwriting—was placed between her palms or on her forehead. It might be enclosed in a blank envelope; for it was not necessary for her to see it, or even to know what it was. Once I tried the experiment of enclosing letters from three different correspondents in separate blank envelopes, shuffling them together, so that I myself should not know one from the other, and afterwards taking them from my pocket at random, one at a time, and giving them to her to "psychometrize"—a newly coined word that was called into active service in those days. From two of these, she received only a confused impression, perhaps in consequence of their juxtaposition for an hour or more in my pocket; but of the third she said, "The magnetism of this is strong enough to overcome anything! The writer is a man, and in force and energy a perfect steam-engine!" She then went on to describe with marvellous discrimination one of my intimate friends, Charles Graham Halpine, poet and journalist, later well known as the writer of the "Private Miles O'Reilly" "Adventures and Letters," and Adjutant-General in our Civil War. It was a note from him that was in the envelope.

Psychometry of this kind may be only a faculty of the mind, and have nothing to do necessarily with departed spirits, but that

it was not so in her case I had what seemed ample evidence. Often in reading characters in this way, she would have visions of spirits that were giving her impressions, and sometimes she would describe the departed friends or relatives of the writers of the letters. Once I placed on her forehead a letter from my sister, Mrs. Fidelia Phelps, of Lockport, New York. After holding it there for a moment she said, "How many sisters have you?" I replied, "Four." "This letter," she went on, "was written by one of them." I asked, "Which one?" After some hesitation she replied, "Not the one who wrote the letter you gave me the other day" (which was a letter from my oldest sister, living in Illinois) "nor the youngest. Some one says 'second, second.' Is it your second sister?" "Go on and describe her," I said; and she continued: "She has black hair—dark eyes—there is something peculiar about them—she has some trouble in her eyes." After much more, which was perfectly accurate as to the personal appearance and character of my second sister, she said that a child, a boy about twelve years old, was present, who called the writer of the letter "Mother." That seemed the only positive error, while everything else that had been said was correct, some of it even surprisingly correct. I remarked, "My sister never had such a child." The medium seemed troubled for a moment, then replied, "He insists that he is the son of the sister who wrote this letter, and that he has been several years in the spirit world. Your father and other relatives are here with him."

Before I slept that night, I wrote to my sister, relating the circumstances of the interview even to the last apparent error; and in a few days received from her the explanation. She had had, about twelve years before, a son that died at birth—an event of which I, an absent young brother, had, naturally enough, not been informed.

That many of Mrs. Newton's visions were merely pictures presented to her mind or created by her own imagination was quite certain. She herself was aware of the distinction, but insisted that the pictures were "impressions" given to her by spirit visitants, and that her own conscious volition had nothing to do with them. They were generally symbolic of some truth or some lesson to be conveyed, and were often highly poetic, even prophetic. When, in writing the novel "Martin Merrivale," I endowed the

blind girl, Alice, with this faculty of pictorial vision it was no fictitious fancy, but a psychological reality attributed to the fictitious character.

In the latter part of June, 1853, I had planned a trip to the White Mountains in company with Dr. Harris, a dentist of Worcester. Having received from him what I supposed to be a final letter on the subject, I handed it to Mrs. Newton. She passed into her usual state of semi-trance and said, presently, "You will not take that trip with Dr. Harris."

To my remark that the arrangements were made and could not well be changed, she answered, emphatically: "You will not take the trip. *They* say so. They do not explain why. But"—she gave a shudder—"I see a strange thing!" It was some seconds before she added, "A horrible thing! A man hanging by the neck." I asked what that had to do with it. "I don't know," she replied, "but it is somehow in the way of your taking the trip." And she repeated very positively, "You will not go to the mountains with Dr. Harris."

As some of her visions seemed to have no special significance, I concluded that this was one of them, but I was impressed by it, as it threatened an interruption of my plans. Two or three days afterwards I saw in "The Boston Post" this item: "Dr. Post, a dentist of Willimantic, Connecticut, has committed suicide by hanging himself to a bedpost." The coincidence of the words "Boston Post," "Dr. Post" and "bedpost" served to fix the item in my mind, although I was far from connecting it with Mrs. Newton's vision. The date of the suicide was not given, and I did not afterwards take the trouble to ascertain it, which seems now unaccountable negligence on my part, for upon that depends the question whether the vision was altogether prophetic or merely, in the ordinary sense, clairvoyant. My impression has always been that the vision was received before the incident took place; and I am aware how immensely the interest of the incident would be enhanced if this point could be established. It may seem strange that I did not make careful investigations and records of such matters to their minutest details; but they had become too common in my experience to be considered worth taking trouble about, and I had no thought of ever making use of them in the future.

It was still some days after the item appeared in the "Post" that I received a letter from Dr. Harris saying, "I find I shall

not be able to take the White Mountains trip with you, for the reason that my assistant, whom I expected to leave in charge of the office during my absence, has been called to Willimantic to take the place of Dr. Post, who lately committed suicide."

We did not make the trip. Whether the suicide antedated the vision or not, the prediction of a circumstance concerning me that came to pass in this roundabout way, was sufficiently curious.

Some of the best of Mrs. Newton's perceptions had a prophetic character, unless we are to regard them as extraordinary coincidences; and they continued of not infrequent occurrence during many years. She never became a public medium, but she was always ready, even too ready, to "sit" for her friends, and for others whom her husband's reputation as a writer brought to the house; and I was more than once present when she gave astonishing "tests" to persons she had never seen before. I will give one more instance of her vaticinal faculty, although it belongs to a period later than those I have described.

I was present one evening when she passed "under the influence," and saw around my head something like the halo of a saint. I questioned the appropriateness of this, when she proceeded: "It is not a halo; it is more like a planetary ring—one of the rings thrown off from the sun in the formation of the planets." After a pause she continued, "Now it is no longer a ring, but it all breaks up and comes together in a single mass; and there is another ring forming." So she described the evolution of four or five rings, one after another, each in turn condensing into a planet. There were certainly four, but she was not quite sure of the fifth. To my question as to the meaning of it all she replied: "Your mind is the sun, and they are a series of books you are to write, all connected, belonging to one system. The first will be written very soon, and the others will follow." I had not in mind the writing of any such books, or of any book at all, at that time. But very soon after I was called upon, most unexpectedly, to write a serial story for "Our Young Folks" (a magazine that I was then editing), which satisfied readers and publishers so well that I followed it with a sequel, and that with another, and so on, until I had written for "Our Young Folks" and "St. Nicholas" five serial stories, each complete in itself, but all having "Jack Hazzard" for the principal character. The apparent verification of the prophecy may, of course, have been

merely coincidental; but it was a pleasing fancy that the ring, in each case, corresponded with the serial publication running through the year, and that the "planet" was the volume into which the twelve numbers were duly gathered at the end.

Is there, then, a wisdom of the spirit, or are there invisible beings surrounding and prompting us, that "can look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow"? Or is it all illusion?

*Conclusions.*—In the earlier years of which I have been writing, I lost no opportunity of studying the various phases of mediumistic manifestations, public or private. Many of these were as astonishing as those I have described; but I need not speak of them further than to say that, while some were undoubtedly eked out by trickery, or were perhaps altogether fraudulent, I was forced to conclude that they were for the most part genuine. By this I mean that they were not produced by any sleight-of-hand or system of deception, but that mediums themselves understood no more of their nature and origin than the intelligent, unbiased spectator. How, then, are they to be accounted for? All sorts of agencies have been conjectured from that day to this; electricity, nerve atmosphere, psychic force, telepathy, unconscious cerebral action, anything, often, rather than the single, simple explanation to which all the phenomena, in whatever plane, unmistakably point. Even that overdriven and broken-down hack, Mesmerism, has been taken out of the limbo of humbuggery, to which science previously consigned it, curried and caparisoned, renamed "Hypnotism," and ridden bravely in the crusade against the greater delusion.

I do not propose to philosophize on the subject here, but merely to point out that, while electricity may be employed in the production of raps and kindred phenomena, it can hardly supply the intelligence accompanying them; and that, although telepathy may enable your medium to select from a number of folded paper pellets the one on which you have secretly written the name of a departed friend, and write for you a message on some subject known only to you and that friend; yet when he slips up his sleeve and shows you that friend's initials raised in red welts on his arm (all which I have witnessed) telepathy steps down from the witness-stand and walks out of court.

So of all the other theories except one. Why not accept the testimony of the manifesting power itself? Question the mys-

terious agency behind all the diverse forms of what are called spiritualism, who or what it is, and the answer never comes "Magnetism," "Thought - transference," "Subliminal consciousness," nor anything of that sort, but always and invariably, "We are spirits." If aught else, why does it not sometimes say so? Why will it not listen to argument, and admit that it has hitherto mistaken its own identity? According to my experience, the different aspects of the phenomena are like a circle of mirrors, some fair and clear, others more or less murky, but all reflecting their rays upon a central focus of truth. Not that the assumption of spirit mediation explains everything. Much is still hopelessly obscure. But the wonder is, not that this wireless telegraphy should encounter so many disturbing influences, but that there should be any communication at all across the dim boundaries of states so unthinkably dissimilar.

The one incredible thing, from the materialistic point of view, is that the individual spirit should continue to exist after the body's dissolution. Difficulties disappear when we admit this possibility. It is no argument against the spiritualistic origin of the messages that so many of them are imperfect or contradictory or even illiterate and vulgar. The ignorant and the depraved are not, on entering the spheres beyond this, transformed at once into angels of light. It is an error to regard whatever purports to come from those spheres as authoritative and worthy of acceptance; as if we should heed all the voices that call us through a speaking-tube, to which not only the friends who have gone out from us, but the rabble of the street also have access. Is it not equally unwise to cut off and condemn all communication, because many of the calls are false or foolish or broken by baffling echoes?

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